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Childcare: The Fundamental Things

Dr Pam Jarvis

In 1931, songwriter Herman Hupfield wrote:

No matter what the progress
Or what may yet be proved
The simple facts of life are such
They cannot be removed.

You must remember this
A kiss is just a kiss, a sigh is just a sigh.
The fundamental things apply
As time goes by.

Reel Classics (2011, online)

The song went on, of course, to become a classic, and is most remembered for its inclusion in the 1942 movie *Casablanca*. As is inevitably the case with cultural classics, the sentiments communicated relate to perennial human existence, in this case, people's bewilderment with progress, alongside a reassurance that there are some aspects of life that will endure through generations. One such human 'fundamental' relates to the principles of supply and demand; a person offering goods and services cannot ask for a higher price than the buyer is able to pay, because when this happens, the initiative will inevitably fail.

Unfortunately, this seems to be a 'fundamental thing' that has not been grasped by successive English governments with respect to the provision of childcare, for which the mantra since the days of New Labour has been that it must somehow become 'self-sustaining'. For this to happen, however, care must logically be provided at a cost below the average wage, or two parents earning the average wage (i.e., the majority) would have to dedicate the whole of one parent's wages to childcare costs. However, at this point most parents very reasonably decide that unless they are able to find lower-cost care elsewhere, for example from a grandparent, it is pointless for both of them to engage in paid work, given that one wage will be wholly consumed by childcare.

While government support has been offered for 15 'free' hours of care for three and four year olds, the care sector has commented that the per hour fee that they are receiving does not cover the cost of care, and that settings consequently have to charge parents over and above the actual hourly rate for *non*-state funded hours of care in order to stay afloat financially. Now the newly elected Conservative Government has pledged to double the number of hours of 'free' care offered, many settings have consequently indicated that they will become unable to maintain an acceptably high quality care and education environment at the level of funding that they receive, in particular, they will become unable to attract/ retain well educated, highly skilled practitioners, who will inevitably seek employment elsewhere when offered very low wages (The Guardian 2015). The response from the Government thus far has unsurprisingly been silence; they have been put into a position where they are being asked to reveal the value that they put upon the nation's children, in a

society where human worth is overwhelmingly evaluated in terms of economic production. Logically, the only way in which children can be economically generative is in a situation where their working parents pay another adult a wage to take care of them- but profit can only be realised if the adults providing care do so at a cost below that of the wage of the average adult in the society in question: a conundrum because of course, the fundamental things apply.

There is further evidence of the government's lack of understanding of 'the fundamental things' in the recent, very public collapse of two children's charities, the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) and Kids Company. As Stephen Bush comments in *The Independent* 'strip away funding, encourage a race to the bottom in terms of administrative costs, and what happens is not a big society but a bad one' (The Independent 2015).

Internationally acclaimed child care expert John Bowlby, writing at the beginning of the cultural slide towards mass daycare argued:

Man and woman power devoted to the production of material goods counts a plus in all our economic indices. Man and woman power devoted to the production of happy, healthy and self-reliant children... does not count at all. We have created a topsy-turvy world.

Bowlby (1988, p.2)

It is now past time for Anglo-American governments to concede that the 'childcare gap' that twenty first century families face is an emergent factor from neo-liberal policies and practices, narrowly predicated upon human beings as 'capital'. In such a culture, the needs of children and families are inevitably constructed as subordinate to commerce and consumption, and services consequently not premised upon what might be best for human beings, but upon what appears to be most expedient within national and international economies.

In the web magazine 'New Republic' Elizabeth Stoker Bruenig comments:

Human capital is one of the more odious terms in the capitalist lexicon. The phrase advances a couple of key confusions: First, that human value arises from an ability to produce wealth; second, that there is no distinction between labour (the work that humans do) and capital (sources of wealth that passively generate income).

(Stoker Bruenig 2015, online)

We have forgotten the fundamental point of human existence- to focus upon what is best for *people*, rather than whatever might be most likely to keep an already broken international economy afloat; an economy that has become so poorly tuned to humanity that the resulting static drowns out human voices. Inevitably, young children, who require the most human investment, become the biggest losers. It is surely time to remember those 'fundamental (human) things' and subsequently to create 'policies... grounded on the best available evidence of what human beings are

like' (Singer, 1999, p. 61). If we can start from this premise, we will be able to re-imagine families and communities within a cultural agenda which is based upon the needs of human beings rather than the insatiable demands of the banks and the international money markets.

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